

Adolescents and Self-Taken Sexual Images: A Review of the Literature

Aims

The creation of new digital spaces for youth interaction and image exchange has led to a wealth of media coverage and academic literature highlighting young people's 'sexting' (or the sending or posting of sexually suggestive images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via mobiles or over the internet). Yet there remains a lack of quality research seeking to provide adolescents with a voice to explain their behaviours. This review presents a summary of the existing international literature exploring the influence of motivational, lifestyle and personality factors on young people's sexting experiences. These issues are examined within a broader, developmental framework, which recognises the role of contemporary media culture and normative adolescent social, visual behaviours, alongside changing perceptions of gender and sexual identity.

Key Findings

- The review highlights that sexting is remarkably varied in terms of context, meaning and intention, with the potential for consensual and non-consensual aspects of the activity.
- Whilst sexting can be a means of flirting or enhancing a sexual relationship, it can highlight potential vulnerabilities to sexual victimisation or to participation in risky sexual practices.
- Sexting is inextricably linked to social expectations of gendered sexual behaviours, with females often deriving less satisfaction from their experiences and being perceived more negatively by their peers.
- Contextualising young people's experiences within the media landscape highlights the importance of understanding sexting as part of the broader visual, image-saturated and sexualised media culture of young people's daily lives. This includes the blurring of on and offline, as well as public and private behaviours.
- Further enquiry should seek to conduct theoretically informed research and to explore more nuanced understandings of the links between sexting context and motivations, lifestyles, personality factors and sexual interactions.

Policy Context

Adolescent self-taken sexual images have become an increasing source of interest and concern across specialist agencies such as law enforcement and educationalists, as well as the general public. However, there remains a need for information to help parents identify young people's motivations for sexting and to better understand their experiences in order to discuss risks and behaviours in a more open context. It is also important to enhance information, advice and guidance for practitioners working with young people engaged in sexting activities, to establish informed support networks and aid effective ways of sharing knowledge.

Methodology

The review employed a systematic search across nine databases, encompassing the interdisciplinary subject areas of psychology, sociology, health, media studies and education. Criteria for inclusion were as follows: Research exploring the sexting behaviours of young people under the age of 25; examination of young people's experiences of sending (rather than receiving or viewing) nude or nearly nude pictures or images via a mobile or the internet; and discussion around any risks, issues or consequences related to young people's sexting practices.

Given the wealth of literature in the field and the continually changing nature of social and online media technology, the review focused on papers published between January 2009 and September 2014, written in English and appearing in peer reviewed journals. This led to a total of 88 records identified for inclusion in the review.

Background

Previous systematic reviews have sought to identify both the prevalence of adolescent sexting and the factors influencing participation across the age spectrum. Yet there is a dearth of literature exploring the experiences of the adolescent and the young adult population. This review sought to focus thematically on contemporary debates around young people's motivations for self-producing sexual images, the factors influencing their behaviours and the potential psychological and behavioural outcomes. The review formed the first part of an EU-funded study 'Self-Produced Images – Risk Taking Online' (SPIRTO) aimed at exploring the different contexts behind the creation of self-taken sexual images and the consequences for the young people involved.

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